

**PRAISE FOR
ED LIN**

“Lin is an astonishing talent.”

— JUNOT DÍAZ

“Lin’s unsentimental, purely realist—not naturalist, not socialist, not postmodernist—novel raises hopes that American fiction may yet grow up.”

— BOOKLIST, STARRED REVIEW, FOR *Waylaid*

“For a guy who scoffs at the ghosts revered by so many of his fellow Taiwanese, droll everyman Jing-nan, a night-market food stall manager, ironically finds himself spending much of his time chasing one as he investigates the murder of his childhood sweetheart, Julia Huang, in this darkly comic thriller from Lin.”

— PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW, FOR *Ghost Month*

“Hold on for a breathtaking, multi-cultural ride. With some good luck and a few well-placed joss sticks, you just might survive.”

— MARTIN LIMÓN, AUTHOR OF *Nightmare Range*, FOR *Ghost Month*

“Stellar . . . Lin effortlessly blends humor, plausible plot twists, and the politics and economics of contemporary Taiwan.”

— PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW, FOR *99 Ways to Die*

“A stylish, smart thriller for the mind, heart, and gut. Sex, music, history, politics, food, humor, and just a touch of violence and death—you get it all. And when you’re done, you’ll beg for more.”

— VIET THANH NGUYEN, PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *The Sympathizer*, FOR *Incensed*

“A unique blend of tension, charm, tragedy and optimism, with characters you’ll love, and a setting so real you’ll think you’ve been there.”

— LEE CHILD, FOR *Ghost Month*

**DAVID TUNG CAN'T HAVE
A GIRLFRIEND UNTIL
HE GETS INTO AN
IVY LEAGUE COLLEGE**

**David Tung Can't Have A Girlfriend
Until He Gets Into An Ivy League College**
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DAVID TUNG CAN'T HAVE A GIRLFRIEND UNTIL HE GETS INTO AN IVY LEAGUE COLLEGE



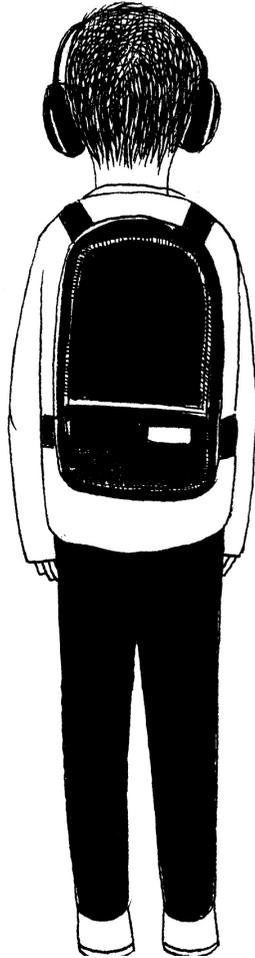
KAYA PRESS

LOS ANGELES





For all the Saturday crews



CHAPTER ONE

As precious minutes ticked down in homeroom, I was anxious to get to my first class, biology. Yet I also desperately wanted more time to study for the quiz that I and only I knew was coming. I couldn't hold my legs still as I tried to memorize everything in my book and notes.

I took a deep breath and tuned out all distractions. The homeroom announcements sounded like pleasant fish-tank bubbling noise. I envisioned my class rank rising.

It was a Thursday in mid-March, and sophomore year was almost over. I was ranked eighth out of a class of 240. If I could end the year in sixth or seventh place, that would be a major win. One or two steps up may not seem like much, but for college applications from Shark Beach High, a higher rank would mean the world.

My school is a public institution based in a landlocked town in northern New Jersey known for receiving 20-25 Ivy League college admissions offers every year. That's

one of the highest for any public high school our size in the state, even if the figures are skewed by seniors who receive offers from multiple schools.

In reality, only six or seven students per year from Shark Beach High end up attending Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, Penn, Cornell, Brown, and Dartmouth. In that order of preference. Only six or seven. I was on the wrong side of the cutoff.

Luckily for me, the top 10 students in my grade are separated by only 0.25 grade points. This also means, however, that we have to battle amongst ourselves for every hundredth of a point.

With two more years to go, any one of us could be valedictorian. Though, to be honest, it's actually more important to be at the top of the class at the end of the first grading period of senior year, when the applications go in.

Cutthroat competition exists in high schools all across the country, but you'd be hard-pressed to find students as bloodthirsty as the ones at Shark Beach High.

We're the only school on the East Coast where about 80% of the students are Asian American, nearly all Chinese, and many with immigrant parents. Twenty-eight percent of the student body are themselves immigrants. And immigrants are competitive as hell, if you don't already know.

Shark Beach's school system wasn't always like this. When I was really small, in first grade or so, there were so few Asians that I would still occasionally get ching-chonged in the hallways at school. That sure doesn't

happen any more. About a decade ago, other Asians began moving in from across the country and from overseas, drawn by the stellar schools and the town's proximity to New York City. Shark Beach offers an elite education that's tuition-free for whoever can afford to live and pay taxes here. It's like catnip for ambitious parents, immigrant or otherwise.

Nowadays, the hallways are filled with Chings *and* Chongs.

This fact about our town has attracted media attention in recent years. CNN came to Shark Beach High to interview students when Harvard was being sued for allegedly discriminating against Asian American applicants. The non-Asian reporter they'd sent tried so hard to push us equivocating kids into saying something substantial, but nobody had wanted to jeopardize their own upcoming applications. Yes, every Shark Beach High student acknowledged, any sort of bias is wrong, but it's up to the courts to decide.

CNN should have known better than to put "success"-focused kids on the spot, but, hey, our faces, not our voices, were what they wanted most.

Shark Beach High students might make for bland talking heads, but throw a minor pop quiz at us, and we'll rip each other to pieces for every point. We'll also take on every bonus question and any extra credit made available to us to lift that B-plus to an A-minus to an A. We even sometimes resort to sandbagging the competition.

Consider our current class valedictorian, Brett Hau. Everyone knows he has a sweet tooth. So on the days when there's a big test, Brett's rivals ply him with free candy and soda, hoping he'll have a sugar crash. During the last big in-class essay we had for Honors English, Brett had to make a run for the bathroom, but he managed to get back in time to finish. Still snagged a 100%. Maybe we should all drink four Cokes before tests.

Some idiots get too carried away with all of this, of course. One junior was suspended last year for slashing someone's car tires in the school parking lot. How stupid. You're supposed to slash their tires *before* they can get to school.

Most students stick to expensive but more socially acceptable methods, including private tutors and extra test prep. Whispers have gone around about parents who've gone so far as to bribe college officials for an admission, but that route is definitely closed off nowadays.

My family isn't part of that moneyed world. We own and operate the mid-priced but solid Tung's Garden, located in the southern part of Shark Beach, an area that's just starting to see more redevelopment. So no extra academic help for me. My parents expect me to get better grades by listening to them yell at me. Then again, even if they were willing or able to pay for a tutor, I wouldn't have time for lessons anyways. I work at the restaurant after school and on the weekends—basically, nearly all my waking non-school hours.

In any case, everyone knows that academic success alone isn't good enough for Ivy League admissions. If anything, intangibles might matter even more than grades. If the Harvard lawsuit revealed anything about that school's admission process, it's that all A's and nothing else is a major turnoff. The other Ivies can't be that different.

For a while, I was hoping that becoming an emerging track star would help me stand out. I was the fastest ninth grader in the school in the 200 and 400, and though I haven't yet beat any school records, I've come close.

I hoped to do even better this year, but I've had to withdraw from track meets and practices after I got shin splints in December. We'd been running indoors, not on grass, and I'd been pushing myself hard—too hard, it turned out.

My lower legs no longer hurt, but I couldn't risk aggravating them again. Making first or second team for all-state boys in the fall would be a great way to help dress up that college application. But for the moment, all I can do is try to raise my class rank by focusing on classes such as biology, in which I am only an A-minus student.

Biology at Shark Beach High is taught by Mr. del Pino, who imagines himself to be thinner than he really is. His ill-fitting clothes are always just a smidge too snug, and from the side, his body looks like a capital "P," with his belt right under the carb bulge. A million years ago he himself had been a student at Shark Beach High. He

often laments how we can't do the same labs that he used to do back in the day, when two boys could pick up dead dogs from the kill shelter for class dissections. Now he has to use worms instead, or, even worse, virtual frogs on school tablets.

Word on the street, though, is that a stellar recommendation letter from him can crack open the doors of an Ivy. So doing well in his class is a must for me.

I want to be a doctor, after all. The kind that displays my diploma proudly on my office wall.

All this is easier said than done, though. Mr. del Pino's notoriously tough pop quizzes can elicit whimpers from even the most confident student.

One day, when I was doubled over from pain upon hearing his third question—he always dictates his questions—my eyes were drawn to his feet under his desk. His exposed socks were mismatched.

I'd noticed this before but had chalked it up to just another one of Mr. del Pino's many quirks. Something about seeing this in the midst of taking a pop quiz, though, made me wonder about the correlation between the two. After a few weeks of close observation, I came up with a theory. Mr. del Pino wears mismatched socks on days that he has to do laundry, which puts him in a bad mood, which makes him more apt to spring an impromptu quiz.

I don't know how close to the truth my theory is, but our last five pop quizzes have taken place on odd-socks days.

All this has led to me making a point of looking for

Mr. del Pino in the hallway before homeroom so I can secretly take pictures of his feet. My iPhone is an old model, but it still has burst mode.

Upon reviewing this morning's photos, I saw that one sock was black and one was brown. A Thursday pop quiz was for certain!

I looked around my homeroom. No one else from my biology class was studying, much less cramming. They had no idea what was coming down the pike.

So while the popular kids chatted amongst themselves about parties and other outings that I wouldn't be invited to, I stared at my bio book and focused on the taxonomy of humans and other animals.

When the bell rang, I bolted out of the room. I wanted to get to Mr. del Pino's class early to maximize every possible moment of additional study time.

As always, Mr. del Pino stood at the doorway of the classroom, greeting us individually in a mock formal tone as we walked in.

"Mr. Wong, good to see you. Ms. Ko, thank you for coming today. Ah, Mr. Tung, you look like you're up to no good."

"Why?" I asked.

"I can see the mischief in your eyes," he threw back at me before moving on to his next target. "Ms. Lee, we've got a seat just for you in the front. Mr. Lin, let's try to stand up straight, your bones aren't that heavy."

I slid into my seat and dealt myself books and notebooks from my bag. I took a breath and dove in, trying to stuff in one more essential detail before the

bell rang. I already had the taxonomy mnemonic “King Phillip came over from Germany, swimming” firmly lodged in my head, but the Latin classification names were harder to get down perfectly. Mr. del Pino never did multiple choice, and nothing was worse than getting an answer wrong because you ended something with an “a” when it should have ended with “ae.”

“Family hominidae,” I repeated to myself. I made up another mnemonic: “The family will be home in a day.”

The bell rang. Mr. del Pino closed the door promptly and headed to his desk.

“Today, I have a lovely little film I’d like to show you,” he declared, pausing to dramatically drum his fingers on his desk. “But first, let’s have a little quiz.”

As most of the class tried to swallow their sighs, I lit up with glee.

There were 10 questions on the pop quiz, and I was pretty sure I got nine of them right. Based on the twisted feet and rocking upper bodies of my fellow students, I’d say I did pretty damned good relative to everyone else.

After the test, we saw the promised short film, which was about extinct primates. Then, in order to run out the clock, we took turns reading aloud from the main textbook. I flipped back a few pages to check on the one question I hadn’t been sure about. My chest swelled with pride. I’d gotten a perfect score.

I glanced at Hanson Ding. He, too, was checking his answers, and seemed to be silently cursing. Since he was ranked #3, this was good for me only in a long-term sense. No matter how poorly Hanson did, I still

wouldn’t be within striking distance of him because of this one quiz alone. There was a decent chance, though, that today I could slip by one of my more immediate rivals, Christina Tau, who was currently right above me in seventh place. I squirmed at the thought. She had seemed just out of reach all year.

Christina’s a girl that you know you’re supposed to think is hot because everyone says she is. She looks like the slinky cat women who hang around the bad guys in movies. Too much mascara and lipstick makes her frequent scowls look sexy, and her form-fitting, upscale clothes show off the curves around her widening hips. Sometimes she sways her shoulder-length hair around like she’s in a shampoo commercial.

Yet she’s somehow managed to keep me out of the top seven for the entirety of our freshman year until now. How could someone who puts so much effort into the way she looks also have the time and energy to get a slightly better grade point average than mine? Was she really smarter than me? I hoped not. I hoped no one ahead of me was.

One thing was for sure at least: nobody, not even Christina, could beat my perfect score for the day in biology. Too bad for her that she was in Mr. del Pino’s second section of biology. He made their quiz a lot harder on the assumption that they’d have advance notice that a quiz was on its way.

I walked to my next class with my head held higher than usual. The satisfaction I felt from nailing that biology quiz was enough to sustain me through the

whole weekend.

As I turned down the hallway, I almost ran into some lackeys from the student council slapping up notices for the upcoming Dames Ball. I gave one flyer a cursory glance, then immediately forgot about it. No way would I be going, after all. For one thing, the Dames Ball required the girls to do the asking, and no one was going to ask me.

Mainly, though, I'd been told in no uncertain terms by my mother that I couldn't date in high school. My father may not have felt the same way, but he had said nothing. What she said overruled him, anyway.

How did I feel about all this? Well, I did think about girls from time to time, but never consciously or for very long. Maybe that was my mother's ultimate goal all along.

Because of ongoing construction to expand the school, I still have the same locker I was assigned to on a "temporary" basis at the beginning of my freshman year. It's in a hastily assembled bank of lockers in a dead-end hallway that leads to what used to be the music practice room.

Shark Beach High no longer has a music program, but that's no big deal because nearly all the Asian kids take private piano and violin lessons. By way of contrast, when the school tried to institute a lottery to determine who would get into the overcrowded AP physics class, the Greater Shark Beach Chinese School organized parents to harass the principal and the local board of education with phone calls and emails until a

second section of AP physics was added.

The area around my locker is generally emptier than other hallways, as it's a bit out of the way. Given that my school strategy is to get through the day efficiently while earning straight A's, though, the relative solitude suits me just fine.

As I was swapping some books, I felt someone bump my shoulder.

"Oh, sorry," said Scott Sima. "I didn't make you drop something, did I?"

"No," I said. "Everything's cool."

Scott is a junior, a football player, and one of the biggest kids in school. He's also one of the most popular. The only commotion I ever see near my locker is when a line of giggling girls comes by to ask Scott how he's doing. Or if some of his teammates drop by to act out various viral sports videos.

Harvard's football coach supposedly sent him a letter asking if he planned to apply. If true, he remains remarkably modest about it all. Unlike some students, he isn't stuck up about whom he talks to or not. Though I'm pretty sure he doesn't know me by name.

"Yo, Scott!" someone yelled.

Scott turned to me and rapped the door of his locker. "Take care, David," he said.

Wow, he does know my name!

"Later, Scott," I managed to reply in an even tone.

Even if Scott's not a friend, he's always friendly. He acknowledges everyone equally, like someone running for president.